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Get Reel

By Christine Ratliff
SouthFlorida.com

How to Use Movies as Catalysts for Communicating with Kids

[E-mail story](#) [Print story](#)

As a young, single mother, I often wondered how I could possibly prepare my daughter for the world, with its perennial ups and downs, how I could arm her for the challenges that inevitably lay ahead. After all, there were so many things in the world that I hadn't even figured out yet. I felt alone and inadequate.

I think I turned to movies because, years ago, they'd helped me to survive. At 15, I became profoundly depressed following the death of my sister. I no longer felt connected to my friends, my life. Then, one night, I went to see Fame. When I left the theater, I was not the same girl who had arrived two hours earlier. I was suddenly filled with hope and open to possibilities. In my attempt to keep those positive feelings alive, I returned to the theater the next night and the night after that. Thirty years later, I still remember my favorite line, "You got dreams? You want fame? Well, fame costs. And right here is where you start paying. In sweat." This served as a constant reminder to me of the hard work and determination needed to fulfill my dreams. I was also able to bond with the teen characters on the screen in a way that I was unable to bond with my peers at school. In profound ways, that movie changed my life.

So, a decade later, perhaps it was not surprising that my little girl and I were often curled up in sleeping bags, a bucket of popcorn between us, watching movies. On Fridays, we came home from the library or video store laden with everything from classics and foreign films to new releases. Every time my daughter had a question, I'd pause the tape and we'd talk. Over the years, we discussed love, death, grief, loss, sadness, pain, despair, friendship, prejudice, war, hatred, mental illness, divorce, alcoholism, abortion, and more. Movies became a vehicle for teaching, a catalyst for communicating, a catharsis for feelings.

I call it reel therapy. But others call it cinema therapy or video work. Regardless of what you call it, quality films, like quality art, truly do imitate life, and you can use these parallels to teach and better communicate with your child. Whether your 6-year-old is grieving the loss of the beloved family dog, your 10-year-old is heartbroken over her best friend moving away, or your 12-year-old is plagued by peer pressure, movies can be a pleasant diversion and a beneficial tool for learning and growth -

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Movies as a Therapeutic Tool

As it turns out, my emotional transformation with *Fame* so many years ago was not unique. Others, many of whom now use film therapeutically with their clients, had similar experiences.

"I had a stroke at the age of 34 and for a time, I was unable to walk and my left arm and hand were paralyzed," says Birgit Wolz, Ph.D., a cinema therapist. "Losing physical capacity was devastating. But at the same time, my nervous system was so traumatized that I was unable to cry or express my feelings. Movies, for me, were very freeing and heart-opening. They allowed me to go deeper into my subconscious mind and examine, and eventually understand, what I was feeling. Movies like *My Left Foot* enabled me to see that I didn't need to stay stuck. I sought out movies with characters that modeled the process of accessing strength and it helped me tremendously."

Today, Wolz has recovered from her stroke, although use of her left arm and hand remain limited. But movies were so beneficial to her recovery that she now facilitates cinema therapy groups in Oakland, Calif., and just published *E-Motion Picture Magic: A Movie Lover's Guide to Healing and Transformation* (Glenbridge Publishing, 2004, \$23.95). Cinema therapy, she writes, "is an innovative method based on traditional therapeutic principles, an extension of bibliotherapy, a technique developed by psychiatrist Carl Menninger, who assigned fiction and non-fiction books to his patients to help them develop insight and coping strategies."

"We're not suggesting that movies should replace books or teachers, but they certainly can be a supplementary form of education," writes Ronald Madison, Ed.D., who has used film as a therapeutic tool to enhance communication between parents and children for 25 years, in *Talking Pictures: A Parent's Guide to Using Movies to Discuss Ethics, Values, and Everyday Problems With Children* (Running Press, 2001, \$14.95, written with his daughter, Corey Schmidt). "In only two hours, a film can expose the horrors of Nazi-occupied Holland (*The Diary of Anne Frank*), the self-destructive and drug-induced downfall of a rock legend (*The Doors*), or the challenge of overcoming handicaps (*The Miracle Worker*)." "We'd frequently talk over the ideas of drugs, sex, friendships, and other issues that if brought up in another context (i.e. around the dinner table), would not have been heard as readily," Madison writes.

Kevin J. Weis, clinical director of Smith Community Mental Health in Sunrise agrees: "Movies really can be an asset in broaching certain topics parents may feel uncomfortable discussing with their children," says Weis, a licensed psychologist. "Movies often introduce a related topic or explore a topic more effectively and promote a healthy and meaningful conversation."

How Movies Work As Therapy

Why do movies spark communication in a way that day-to-day conversation may not?

Two main theories of psychology apply:

- Gardner's Multiple Intelligence Theory: As parents, we know that every child, and the way in which they learn, is unique. Film therapy embraces the cognitive and emotional needs of children by engaging multiple intelligences, a theory presented by Howard Gardner in his groundbreaking book *Intelligence Reframed: Multiple Intelligences for the 21st Century* (Basic Books, 2000, \$14.95). Gardner suggests that every child has unique ways of being intelligent. Indeed, researchers further supported his theory when they found that students learn and retain information better when multiple senses are engaged, when they can experience what is being taught visually, linguistically, musically, and so on.
- Jung's Shadow: Movies may allow us to access what Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung termed "the shadow." As babies, we expressed ourselves naturally, without suppressing or censoring. But as we grew up, we learned that certain behaviors and feelings were "unacceptable" or "bad." The term "shadow" refers to these parts that we learned to repress or deny. Over the years, our shadow becomes deeply buried in our subconscious mind, sometimes causing us to behave in ways we don't understand. But Jung also believed that the shadow contains a wellspring of strength, power and creative energy. He believed that if we could access our shadow we could live more fully. Movies, with their inherent detachment (since we are observers only), can court the shadow, bringing it slowly and safely into the light, allowing us entry into those locked areas of our psyche.

Movies May Succeed Where Words Fail

"Sometimes words are hard to find that accurately represent the complexity of a family or parenting issue. Where words may fail, films may succeed. The images shown in a movie may serve as a breakthrough for an issue to be addressed. For example, by watching *Boyz n the Hood*, a parent may be able to finally communicate the importance of education in breaking away from life on the street," Madison and Schmidt write.

"Films served as a bridge between my dad and me, and continued to play that role throughout our life changes," Schmidt writes. "Regardless of the sensitivities and difficulties we were struggling with in our personal relationship, movies provided a common ground on which we'd inevitably connect."

Of course, you don't need a book or web site to help you use movies as a catalyst for communicating with your kids. But it may not be a bad idea, either. "I remember you getting movies that someone else recommended and then being stunned and having to eject them," my daughter recalls, laughing. "Or some topic like sex would come up and you'd say, 'Well, OK, I guess we can talk about that, too.'" She's right, of course. I made a few mistakes along the way. If I had to do it over, I would preview the movie beforehand and I would be more selective in terms of age-appropriateness.

But all in all, movies hold fond memories for us both. I'll never

forget watching A Perfect World - it was the first movie that made my daughter cry. In fact tears were streaming down her face! Because of my overwhelming maternal desire to protect her from pain, she had to physically stop me from ejecting the video.

Every now and then, 10 years later, my daughter still comes home from the library with A Perfect World tucked beneath her arm, usually with a friend who hasn't seen it yet. Many times after that, movies made my daughter cry, and each time, she had to convince me to allow her to continue watching. Feelings frighten me, they always have. My daughter, on the other hand, expresses hers freely and without shame. Perhaps movies played a role in that.

Christine Ratliff is the editor of MSFocus, the national magazine of the Multiple Sclerosis Foundation. She resides in Fort Lauderdale with her daughter, Dana.

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